

# Allusions

Definition, Explanation,  
and Examples

# Allusions

- Definition-a reference within a work to something famous outside it, such as a well-known person, place, event, story, or work of art, literature, music, pop culture.
- Type of **metaphor**
- Purpose-Lets reader/viewer understand new information, characters, plot, setting, etc. by connecting it to something already known.

# Allusion “Problems”

- Not to be confused with “ILLUSIONS”
- In order to understand allusions, one must have a good grasp on “well-known” works of literature, art, music, pop culture, etc. So, if one is not well-read, it will be difficult to fully grasp why an author/writer/director uses an allusion. This is sometimes difficult for high school students.
- Allusions are NOT references to someone/something only a *small* group of people know. So, don’t say, “Sally’s smile looked like my mom’s smile.” While this is a method of comparison, it is not to something well-known (outside of your community).

# Purpose of Allusions

Whenever you come across an allusion, stop and ask yourself:

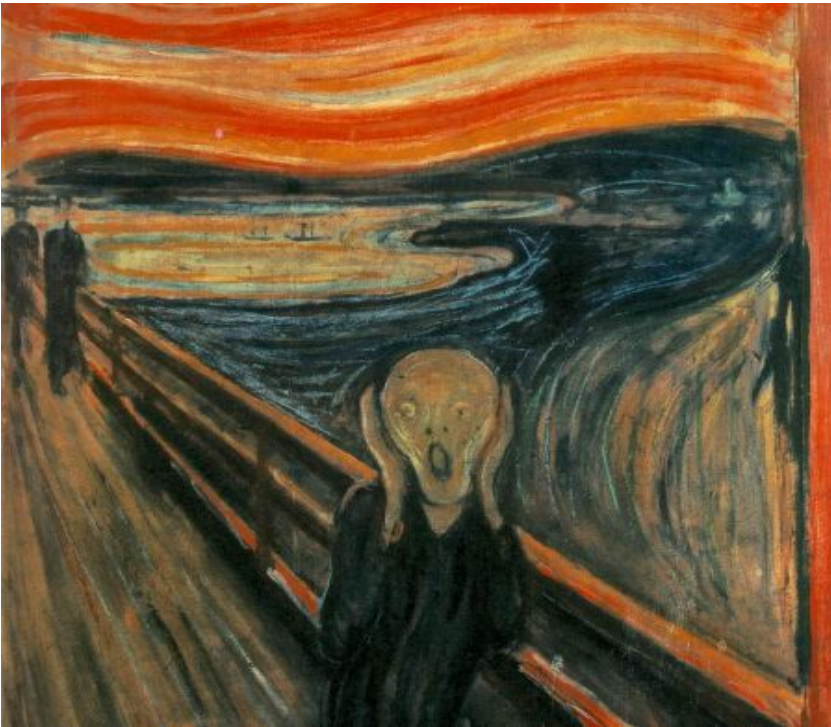
- What does the writer want me to understand about this character, setting, plot, etc. by connecting it to something with which I am already familiar?
- What is the author's purpose in using this allusion?
  - To create the same feeling/mood as the original work?
  - For comedic effect?
  - To show character's motives or traits?
  - Brainstorm with your elbow partner other reasons authors might use an allusion.

# Allusion Example

- Sally had a smile that rivaled that of the *Mona Lisa*.
- Since everyone is familiar with the painting, they can imagine what Sally's smile looks like.



# Allusion Example



The makers of the *Scream* movie ALLUDED TO Munch's work of art "The Scream" in order to instill fear.

# Allusion Example

## FAMILY GUY



## THE SHINING



Danny writes  
“REDRUM” on  
the door at first.



Mirror reflection shows  
“Redrum” which spells  
Murder backwards

# *Family Guy/The Shining* Allusion Explanation



The makers of *Family Guy* make Stewie's blocks say "REDRUM" as an ALLUSION TO *The Shining*. They use this allusion because they know their audience will likely be familiar with *The Shining*, so they will understand the message that Stewie is obsessed with murder. REDRUM=MURDER backwards....as reflected in the mirror in *The Shining*.

- This allusion helps the viewer gain a deeper understanding of Stewie's character—a matricidal maniac!

# Allusion Example

KARATE KID



DISNEY'S HERCULES



Hercules ALLUDES TO Karate Kid when Hercules is training. Disney uses this allusion so the viewer thinks of Karate Kid and how, after training in the sunlight, Daniel wins the big match. The allusion is used to FORESHADOW that Hercules will also be successful in his big fight.

# Allusion Example

- John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* book title alludes to Robert Burns' poem "To a Mouse"

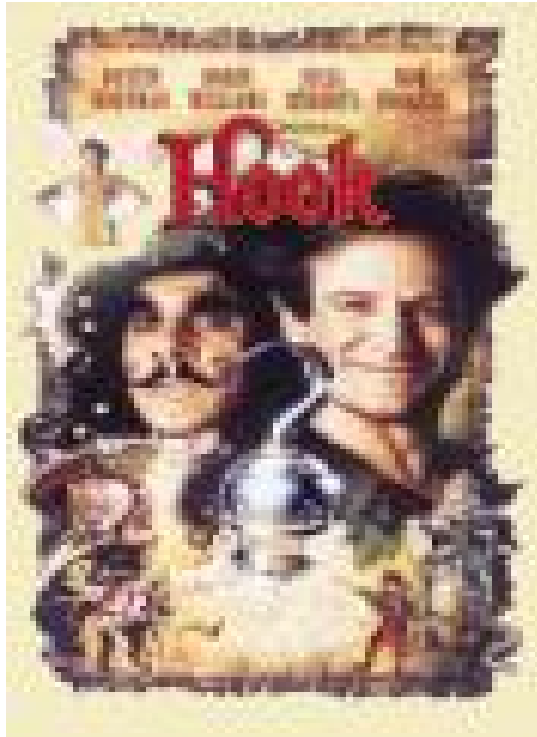
Burns' poem lines:

- The best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry  
(Standard English Version)

## **Reason for allusion:**

- Steinbeck is trying to send the message, through his title, that things will not go as the characters planned. It foreshadows a not-so-happy ending in which dreams are dashed.

# Allusion Example



Peter Pan (Robin Williams) says, “What is this, some sort of the *Lord of the Flies* Pre-school?”

## Allusion Explanation:

- The land is run by kids
- They are savages with no adult influence
- They have been abandoned without adult supervision

# The three most popularly alluded to works are:



- The Bible
- Shakespeare
- Greek/Roman Mythology

So, what does that tell you?

---You are expected to be well-read in order to understand many allusions!

# Biblical Allusion Example

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*



R.P. McMurphy is seen as a Christ figure because Kesey refers to:

- 12 men go on a fishing trip (12 disciples as “fishers of men”)
- Electroshock Therapy=Crown of Thorns
- Electroshock Therapy body placement mimics that of Jesus on the cross
- McMurphy suffers so the rest of the men can prevail

# Shakespeare Allusion Example

- “Et tu, Brute”
  - Latin for “And you, Brutus”
  - Said by Julius Caesar in Shakespeare’s play when he is about to die and realizes Brutus has betrayed him.
  - Used when people want to get the message across that someone has betrayed them
  - Another common betrayal allusion is to Judas Iscariot—the Biblical figure who betrayed Jesus with the “kiss of death” (another allusive phrase!)

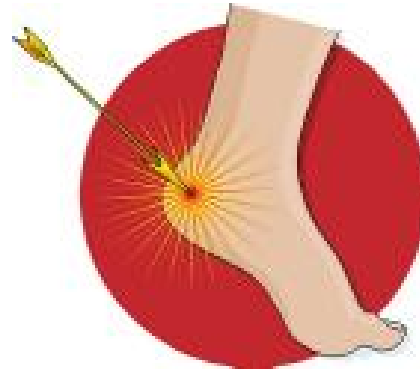


In the scene in *Aladdin* where Genie is trying to make Aladdin a prince, he opens his recipe book. After the crab bites him, a robed hand comes out of the book, to which Genie says, “Et tu, Brute?” indicating that the recipe book has betrayed him, also, along with the crab. The purpose in this case, of course, is for comedic effect.

# Mythology Allusion Example

## Achilles' Heel

- When Achilles was a baby, it was foretold that he would die in battle from an arrow. Naturally, his mother Thetis did not want her son to die. So she took Achilles to a magical river which was supposed to offer powers of invincibility and dipped his body into the water. But as Thetis had held Achilles by the heel, his heel was not washed over by the water of the magical river. Achilles grew up to be a man of war who survived many great battles. But one day, an arrow shot at him was lodged in his heel, killing him instantly. Yet Achilles is remembered as one of the greatest fighters who ever lived.



When someone wants to discuss one's weak point, s/he will refer to it as his/her "Achilles' Heel," meaning that they are strong in all areas except for that one tiny spot.